

BY DANIELLE CASEY

Local Column

# If Phoenix and its leaders did it, we can

The year was 2004. As an alumna of Arizona State University (ASU), I'd heard about its plan to relocate some colleges to downtown Phoenix. Students pursuing degrees in journalism or public service would soon be heading to the urban core. My reaction? I laughed. So did many of my fellow Sun Devils. The consensus was clear: "Downtown? No one wants to go there — it's scary, empty, and forgotten. What were they thinking?"

Fast forward to today, and that laughter has been replaced with awe. Downtown Phoenix has become a thriving hub of innovation, learning, and community. It's home to ASU's downtown campus, a bioscience core anchored by its new medical school, and vibrant multifamily housing developments that cater to students, faculty, and the public. The Thunderbird School of Global Management is steps away from the

Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law and the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication.

The transformation is undeniable. A 2021 report by the Seidman Research Institute found that ASU's downtown campus has created more than 24,000 jobs and nearly \$1.8 billion in economic output. Beyond downtown, ASU's innovation hubs have flourished across the Phoenix metro area, with the university ranking ahead of MIT and Stanford for innovation. In 2023 alone, ASU graduated over 7,200 engineering students — a number that eclipses its entire engineering enrollment just a decade ago.

The Phoenix of today — and the ASU that drove much of this change — are unrecognizable from 20 years ago.

As CEO of the Albuquerque Regional Economic Alliance (AREA), I've studied Phoenix's evolution closely, alongside other thriving regions across the country. I've seen firsthand the transformative power of vision, collaboration, and commitment to bold ideas. That's why AREA recently brought civic and university leaders from Albuquerque on a tour of downtown

Phoenix to see its transformation in action.

One thing became clear during our visit: Albuquerque can achieve something equally extraordinary. What I witnessed from our group was an openness to new ideas and a shared recognition that revitalization doesn't happen by accident — it requires a deliberate, collective effort.

I was especially inspired by the leadership of University of New Mexico (UNM) President Garnett Stokes, who understands that universities are not just academic institutions but catalysts for regional progress. Under her leadership, UNM has embraced its role as a driver of economic development, partnering with AREA and others to reimagine what's possible for Albuquerque. Since the launch of AREA 1.0, our regional economic development strategy, UNM has been a vital partner, with President Stokes expressing unwavering support and alignment between our visions.

That spirit of collaboration continues to grow. Earlier this month, Albuquerque Mayor Tim Keller made a bold commitment: offering a significant piece of vacant downtown property, free of charge, to UNM or any higher education institution ready to take the lead on

revitalization. Mayor Keller's pledge wasn't just about land; it was a promise of partnership and patience, acknowledging that transformative change takes time.

This opportunity is enormous. National experts and local champions agree: higher education can anchor downtown revitalization. In early 2023, AREA hosted national leaders from business improvement districts who stressed the importance of universities in creating vibrant downtowns. Similarly, site selection consultants at an AREA event in 2024 highlighted how a thriving urban core is essential for attracting top talent and new companies.

Phoenix's success wasn't quick or easy. It took leadership, vision, and risk. In 2006, then-Mayor Phil Gordon and ASU President Michael Crow secured funding for the downtown ASU campus through a public referendum — an unprecedented move that sparked a renaissance. Their willingness to act boldly transformed Phoenix's trajectory.

The same opportunity lies before Albuquerque today. By expanding its urban presence and deepening its ties with the city, UNM can play a pivotal role in revitalizing downtown and driving economic growth across the

region. But it will require all of us — AREA, UNM, city leaders, and the broader community — to embrace a shared vision and work together.

The saying goes, “The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second-best time is today.” It’s time for Albuquerque to plant that tree. Through courage, collaboration, and collective action, we can create a thriving, innovative downtown that reflects the talent, creativity, and potential of our community.

This is our moment. Let’s seize it.

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A jet takes flight from Sky Harbor International Airport as the sun sets over Phoenix. Arizona’s Maricopa County, home to Phoenix, is the hottest metropolitan area in the United States. MATT YORK/ASSOCIATED PRESS

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